Reviewer’s report

Title: Mental health of immigrants from the former Soviet Bloc: a future problem for primary health care in the enlarged European Union? A cross-sectional study

Version: 6 Date: 17 October 2006

Reviewer: Kamaldeep Bhui

Reviewer’s report:

Peer Review of mental health of immigrants from the former Soviet Block

I was asked to adjudicate on the publishability of the current revised version of the manuscript previously reviewed and amended. I had access to the original reviews and the recent re-review.

Generally
1. This is an interesting paper which includes data which indicate a potentially higher risk of mental symptoms among migrants from Eastern Europe and Poland but not from the former Soviet Union compared with Swedish people.

2. The outcome is overstated as ‘psychiatric illness’ and ‘psychosomatic illness’ The authors have modified their terminology to ‘illness’ rather than ‘disease’ or ‘disorder’, but they have actually measured symptoms. The process for assigning the diagnosis with clinical relevance is not clear from the methodology. It would be more accurate to simply report higher rate of self reported symptoms of mental distress rather than psychiatric illness and psychosomatic illness. Indeed for the latter physical illness seems not to have been excluded.

3. The conceptual basis of the study is not strong. There are many pre and post migration risk factors of importance. However, this study focuses only on pre-migration factors and gives an essentialist account of risk factors from the countries of origin, assuming these would be transported to Sweden. Yet, immigration policies and the host environment are known to influence risk of mental distress amongst immigrants particularly if there are differential degrees of receptivity or acceptance or prejudice. This has not been addressed.

4. It is difficult to interpret the findings with any confidence. Are there plausible reasons for why the former Soviet Union Block immigrants do not differ from Swedish people? Could culture, nation, environment in Eastern Europe account for this higher risk of mental distress? Analysis of culture in these countries as the potential pathogenic effects is not reported, nor measured.

5. Percentage responses by different national groups are important to report.

6. The proposed implication is that immigration policy should be considerate of the burden of disability amongst immigrants, but I think this is overstated given the outcomes are symptom which may spontaneously fluctuate and not amount to illness or diagnosed conditions.

More specifically
7. On page 5, the exact algorithm by which questions were transformed into diagnostic categories is unclear. I do not think the authors can report psychiatric illness and psychosomatic illness based on these questions.

8. The authors have used the weighting mean and the relevance is not clear. They refer to by 80 post strata. It is not clear and maybe not relevant for the core analysis.

9. Is there any validity work showing the classification of poor social network is valid.

10. On page 9 they report social network and occupational status as being acculturation variables but these would not ordinarily be considered so.

11. Page 13, at one stage the analytic groups are proposed to have been formed on geographical and political considerations and, therefore, the interpretation of the findings should be placed in the same
12. Page 14, there are some analyses to support the findings of the main study; these were added in response to previous reviews, but seem misplaced in the discussion. They may be considered unpublished material and included in the main results section.

13. The study refers most methodological issues of importance to reference number 38, which makes it difficult to judge the current paper on its merits.

Overall, I think the current paper could be a brief communication and an exploratory paper suggesting higher rate of self reported mental and physical symptoms for some but not other immigrant groups creating the need for more sophisticated and theorised research. The current paper appears to over interpret the data which are limited and tries to draw too many conclusions about culture and immigration without having the primary data available to support the interpretations. I think drawing inferences about immigration policy from this current paper is, therefore, not justified (for example in abstract).

---------------------------------------------------------------------
Major Compulsory Revisions (that the author must respond to before a decision on publication can be reached)

---------------------------------------------------------------------
Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)

---------------------------------------------------------------------
Discretionary Revisions (which the author can choose to ignore)

---------------------------------------------------------------------
What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No

Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'